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ABSTRACT

Recent research confirms that children learn to read best by using a balanced literacy program incorporating a combination of explicit phonics, whole language, and good literature. Long before children are able to engage in reading themselves, they must feel that reading is something they want to do. Comfortable and early familiarity with letters is critical for learning to read. Essential to children's growing desire to read is the appeal of being able to decode the exact sounds and words of texts even in the midst of a curriculum that stresses approximation and large meanings of narratives. Before children are taught specific skills and strategies for reading, they need to learn the first strategy of all--read to make sense of texts. Self-selection of reading materials can support children's literacy development. Students develop reading strategies and skills in the context of reading and writing text. In this process, they become literate individuals who not only can read, but who want to. (Contains five references.) (RS)

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LEARNING TO READ, READING TO LEARN

By Vickie Carroll

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LEARNING TO READ, READING TO LEARN

I. Introduction.

Learning to read is a tremendous event in a child's life. This paper explores characteristics of emerging readers and various techniques used by educators to teach reading. Recent research confers that children learn to read most effectively through a "balanced literacy program."

The question of how best teach children to read has been an ongoing controversy for many years. There have been numerous research articles that have examined the merits of phonics instruction versus an integrated approach to teaching reading skills. In 1995, the California Legislature, Gov. Pete Wilson and the State Board of Education took steps to replace this State's experiment of a whole-language technique of teaching reading with a balanced approach that includes explicit, systematic phonics and literature. Many school districts are currently making a transition to include a balanced literacy approach to teaching reading.

II. Principles before children begin to read.

Long before children are able to engage in reading themselves, they must feel that reading is something they want to do. They must develop an appreciation for written language and for the many ways language is useful. They need to develop a basic sense of what print looks like and how it works. They must learn how to handle a book, which way to turn the pages, and that the printed words - not the pictures, tells the story when you read.

Another factor to consider is not only *how* children begin to read but also *when*. According to research conducted by Gould (1998) the average achievement of preschool readers, over a six-year period, remains significantly higher than the average achievement of equally bright schoolmates who did not begin to read until after they

started the first grade. Significantly, this head start gives the first grader a sense of being competent and successful from the very minute they start school.

III. Beginning to Read.

Comfortable and early familiarity with letters is critical for learning to read. Children should learn the names of letters and recognize their corresponding shapes. The ability to think about words as a sequence of phonemes is an essential key to learning how to read an alphabetic language. Children need to become aware of the building blocks of spoken language. They need to understand that sentences are made up as strings of separate words. Given familiarity with letters and an awareness of the sound of phonemes, children are ready to learn about letter sound correspondence. Most children will find it easier to develop phonemic awareness in the process of learning to read and write. Phonemic awareness is simply what we have learned to think of as separate sounds in words. For example, the word "first" has five sounds: f,i,r,s, and t. Young children have difficulty analyzing words into separate sounds, but they can easily reread familiar and simple texts, which in turn helps them develop awareness of letter/sound patterns. Therefore, phonemic awareness and learning to read facilitate one another.

MacGilliray (1997) observed first graders learning to read. She states that essential to the children's growing desire to read, is the appeal of being able to decode the exact sounds and words of texts (parts or phonemes) even in the midst of curriculum that stresses approximation and large meaning in narratives (whole.) In this classroom setting, certain ways of reading seemed to be valued more than others. Parts seemed to have an appeal that led students to attend to individual words as much as possible without breaking down meaning. Children progressively attended more to the parts of language as their abilities increased.

IV. Phonics or Whole Language?

Beginning in the primary grades, typically the first, students begin to learn printed equivalents for the spoken words they know. Children read stories and selections containing common words already familiar from speech. With practice, most children read with increasing fluency and understanding. Some schools and reading textbooks teach students to recognize whole words and stress the meaning of the text. Other first emphasize the study of phonics - that is, the sounds represented by individual letters - and the development of independent word-recognition skills. Only more recently have researchers suggested that some combination of phonics and the use of literature should be counterparts for the ultimate advantage of the student.

V. Reading needs to be Engaging and Meaningful and include Student Selection.

I have observed that students that *can* read, *like* to read. The students who find reading a struggle, resist reading. Therefore, it is important to make reading meaningful and engaging. Reading is basically a meaning making process, that is, proficient readers and even proficient first grade readers, read to make sense of texts. Before children are taught specific skills and strategies for reading, they need to learn the first strategy of all, *read to make sense of texts.* Students need to absorb the idea that reading is supposed to make sense, and that text is not just a bunch of unconnected words to be pronounced.

Harris (1996) observed an elementary school making the shift from a structured basal-reader program that included phonics to a balanced program that focused around the use of good literature. This particular school had successfully used a basal reader approach in that students scored high on standardized tests and were quick to learn how to read. However, by the time the students reached the 3rd grade, parents

and teachers recognized that students lacked development of critical thinking skills. Thus, the school has shifted to incorporate a balanced reading program in hopes of correcting this problem. They will not exclude phonics instruction, rather when a phonics skill is taught, it will be in a meaningful context. For example, rather than using a worksheet on the letter "t", the teacher might use poetry that focuses on the letter "t."

Fresch (1995) argues that self-selection of reading materials supports a 6-year olds literacy development. Students in literature based classrooms take more time in making selections of books to read. Fresch conducted a study of 23 first graders in a whole language classroom. The reading program consisted of three parts: Small group instruction, shared big book reading, and reading self-selected books. Harris concludes that self-selection prompts students to reach for more challenging books and further, they reread them out of interest. Thus, the students consistently make decisions that extend practice in developing literacy. The more time children spend reading, the better readers they become. Indeed, one can become a highly competent reader through extensive reading, even while continuing to have problems with word recognition and decoding.

V. Conclusion.

Recent research confers that children learn to read best by a balanced literacy program incorporating a combination of explicit phonics, whole language with good literature. The texts must engage students and the students need to be a part of the decision making process on what texts are most meaningful to them. This coupled with phonics instruction and whole language techniques seems to be key to best enable students to learn to read. Students develop reading strategies and skills in the context of

reading and writing text. In this process, they become literate individuals whom not only can read, but who want to.

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